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ABSTRACT

The attribution of responsibility literature may suffer from the lack of an appropriate conceptual basis. Although past research has demonstrated the usefulness of Heider's levels of responsibility framework, one facet of Heider's theory that has received little attention is the justification level. Occupational role constraints and severity of outcome were manipulated as a test of Heider's justification level of responsibility for non-intended outcomes. Undergraduates (N=96) read one of four accident case reports in which either an ambulance or an automobile driven by a reporter swerved out of control, causing either minor or serious damage to a third party. Subjects rated the reporter as more responsible (especially in the severe outcome condition), less justified in his behavior, and also recommended the imposition of a larger fine. The severity factor interacted with the role factor only for the responsibility rating. Results demonstrated that the justification effect offers further support for the retention of severity as an important variable and indicates that a distinction should be maintained between the constructs of responsibility and punishment. (Author/NRB)

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ROLE CONSTRAINTS AND OUTCOME SEVERITY: FACTORS IN RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTION

by

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Role Constraints and Severity of Outcome; Factors in the Attribution of Responsibility

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Fishbein and Ajzen (1973) have proposed that the attribution of responsibility literature suffers from the lack of an appropriate conceptual basis. They have strongly urged the return to the original conception of the levels of responsibility as expressed by Heider (1958). Previous work by Shaw and his associates (Shaw & Reitan, 1969; Shaw & Sulzer, 1964) has demonstrated the possible usefulness of Heider's theoretical framework.

One facet of Heider's levels of responsibility notion that has received little attention is the justification level. At this level an individual is held only partially responsible for an intended outcome if external circumstances or environmental factors coerced that behavior. In Heider's terms a person will be seen as less responsible if "anybody would have felt and acted as he did under the circumstances (p. 114)."

It seems quite appropriate that possible environmental causation should be taken into account when assigning responsibility. However, it is unclear why such a justification process is appropriate for only intended outcomes. One can imagine external causative factors and/or environmental constraints upon an actor's behavior that operate at other levels of Heider's scheme, e.g., careless commission. Justifiability may be a pseudo-level in that environmental circumstances may be used to modify attributions to the actor at all possible levels in Heider's scheme. Thus, information implying behavioral justification seems to be independent of the level of causation as expressed by Heider.

Recently, Hamilton (1978) has suggested the importance that social role

requirements may have in the ascription of responsibility to an actor. Behavior that is consistent with the requirements of a particular social role may lead to responsibility judgments of lesser magnitude a similar behavior performed under less stringent societal expectations. Thus, two individuals performing the same molar activity, may produce the same outcome, yet not be equally blameworthy because the behaviors are constrained by differential role requirements. An individual will be seen as less responsible for an outcome if his/her behavior was determined by environmental, social, or role-related constraints.

The following study was an attempt to demonstrate this mitigation of responsibility effect with non-intended outcomes through the manipulation of the occupational role of the prime actor. Accident case reports were constructed in which an ambulance driver and a reporter travel to the scene of a fire. In different conditions either the ambulance or the car of the reporter swerves out of control and strikes another vehicle. The major hypothesis of this study is that given identical behavior, resulting in identical outcomes, differential responsibility judgments would be assigned to the reporter in comparison to the ambulance driver. These two roles were specifically chosen to permit occupationally related constraints upon both individuals, while allowing differences in the respective strength of the justification.

In addition, severity of outcome was considered to be a potentially important variable. Although the effects of outcome severity have been inconsistent (Shaver, 1970; Walster, 1966; Walster, 1967), it may be that under conditions of very severe outcomes the justification effect is related to the seriousness of the result itself. The effects of the behavioral constraints upon responsibility judgments were predicted to be most pronounced

under severe outcome conditions. Thus, an interaction was expected between severity of outcome and occupational role of the actor (i.e., the cause of the accident).

Method

Subjects. 96 undergraduates from a large, midwestern university served as subjects as partial fulfillment of an introductory course requirement.

Materials. Accident report summaries were constructed which described two vehicles, an ambulance and a car driven by a reporter, both of which were traveling to the site of a large fire. En route, either the ambulance or the reporter's car struck a large hole in the pavement, went out of control, and struck another vehicle that had pulled to the right in order to allow the emergency vehicle to pass.

The driver of the stopped auto suffered either minor (minor facial cuts and bruises) or severe (multiple facial cuts, a fractured left wrist, and three cracked ribs) injuries.

The driver of the "accident-producing vehicle" (either the ambulance driver or the reporter) suffered the same injuries in all conditions (minor cuts on the face and hands).

Procedure. Subjects, tested in small groups of 7-10 people, were told that this research involved the selection of accident case reports for a separate project. Experimental booklets representing all possible conditions were randomly distributed within each session.

After reading the accident case report, subjects recorded their judgments about the case on the questionnaires provided. The participants were debriefed and given a thorough explanation of the experiment.

Dependent Measures. Subjects responded to a series of 7-point rating scales. They included ratings of the responsibility of all three individuals

involved; ratings of the justifiability of their respective behavior; ratings of the seriousness of the accident, its predictability, its unusualness, and the relative role of chance factors. Subjects were also asked to levy a fine against one of the individuals and to rate the confidence of their judgments. Subjects were thoroughly debriefed.

Results. Univariate analyses were used to specify the exact nature of the multi-variate effects. The two accident reports were seen as differing in the seriousness of outcome (minor = 3.3 vs. severe = 4.3; $F(1, 93) = 16.62$ $p < .001$). There were no significant effects in relation to any of the judgments concerning the driver of the stopped auto (responsibility or justifiability). Nor were there any differences in subjects' judgments of the unusualness of the accident, it's goodness/badness, the relation of chance as a possible contributing factor, its predictability, or the confidence of the subject.

Table 1 presents the means of the major dependent variables. The rating of the justification of the behavior of the ambulance driver and reporter reflect two main effects. The ambulance driver's behavior ($M = 5.40$) is seen as more justified than the reporter's ($M=4.29$), ($F (1, 93) = 14.13$, $p < .0001$). In addition, regardless of occupational role, behavior that resulted in a minor outcome was rated as more justified ($M = 5.19$) than the identical behavior that resulted in a serious outcome ($M = 4.49$) ($F (1,93) = 6.350$, $p < .01$). The interaction was not significant.

The rating of responsibility shows a main affect for occupational role ($F(1,93) = 3.52$, $p < .06$) and an interaction between role and severity of outcome, ($F(1,93) = 4.47$, $p < .04$). This interaction can be seen in Table 1 in which an extreme rating of responsibility is ascribed to the reporter in the severe outcome condition.

When asked to chose which of the three persons involved, if any, should be fined, subjects in the reporter-caused condition overwhelmingly opted to levy a fine against him; subjects in the ambulance-caused condition were reticent to fine the driver of the ambulance. 54% (26/48) of the subjects would levy a fine against the reporter, while only 19% (9/48) would fine the ambulance driver (Chi Square (1) = 12.99, $p < .0001$).

In addition, not only would subjects be more willing to fine the reporter, but they also levied much higher fines against him, $F(1,93) = 13.67$, $p < .001$). The interaction was not significant.

Discussion. The analysis of the present data sheds some light on two important theoretical questions: Namely, in broadening Heider's notion of justification to include non-intended outcomes, the utility of conceptualizing justification as a distinct level of responsibility attribution becomes questionable. Also, the results offer further support for the retention of severity of outcome as an important variable of concern.

The present experiment has demonstrated that occupational role constraints can affect responsibility-related judgments. In addition, the severity of the accidental outcome appeared to combine with the role effect into an especially harsh judgment against the reporter. However, it must be noted that the exact nature of this effect is impossible to detect from the present experiment. For example, the possibility that this harshness

of judgment was mediated by sympathy toward the actor is untestable from these data. Further elaboration in methodology seems necessary to answer this question.

Furthermore, the present data seem to indicate some discriminant validity between the responsibility measures and the allocation of fine. Shaw and Reitan (1969) have previously demonstrated a difference between attribution of responsibility and sanctioning behavior. Thus, responsibility judgments are not isomorphic with punishment considerations, although they are related. This result is in accord with data reported by Clark, Hren, and Sanchez (1978). They report that in criminal cases, judgments of victim responsibility had little or no relation to sentencing behavior or to victim compensation. Researchers should be more concerned with the delineation of responsibility judgments from punishment. Often these constructs are used interchangably (c.f., Wang and McKillip, 1978).

It is interesting to note that the three major dependent variables (justification, responsibility and fine) seemed to be affected in different ways by the manipulations. This is further evidence for the distinction between the theoretical concepts of justification, responsibility and fine.

The exact nature of the relationships between these constructs is still unclear. More elaborate research is needed in order to specify a complete judgmental model that will account for the observed relationships.

Research Note

Clark, N.T., Hren, R.F., & Sanchez, H. Determinants of responsibility assignment to rape victims: Complicity, Yes! Chauvinsim, No! Paper presented at Midwestern Psychological Association Convention, Chicago, Illinois, May, 1978.

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Table 1

Dependent Variable Means By Condition[1]

Experimental Condition	Dependent Variables			
	Justification	Responsibility	Fine	(N)
Ambulance Caused				
Minor	5.73	3.64	$60.23	(22)
Severe	5.12	3.38	30.77	(26)
Reporter Caused				
Minor	4.73	3.54	173.08	(26)
Severe	3.78	4.87	214.13	(22)

1. These are the ratings that pertain to the causal agent of the accident.